We dedicate this issue to

Pearl Segall

poet, editor, and friend.
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Our Mother: The General

For all sixteen years of our lives,
our mother has possessed all of the
qualities of that honored position—Mother.
She has been gentle, and kind, and
beautiful. Strangely enough, though,
we still see our mother as a GENERAL.

Like a general, she is wise and strong.
Mother is modest when correct and knows
when to admit (those few times) when wrong.
She is brave and she looks over her troops
with care, with respect, and with love.
Yes. Our mother is a general.

We now take the opportunity to salute you, Mother.
And while this may seem embarrassing to a general,
We want to say, “We love you.”

— Bob and Rick Segall

To Pearl

We dressed her a little differently,
Told her stories of castles and of kings.
We loved her, laughed and cried with her,
And disciplined her as our own.

She responded to our care
And was very well-behaved.
But when she was put to bed,
Her slumber was marked with cries for Mother.

And though we gladly cradled her
And watched in wonder while she grew,
We now relinquish her with sadness
And with joy.

For she is and will always be
Your baby, Pearl.
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et al.: ICON Fall 1987

FALL 1987  Number 1

VOLUME XXVI

ICON, the magazine for literature, art, and photography of the Trumbull Campus of Kent State University, is sponsored by the English Department in conjunction with the Art Department and is funded by the Student Affairs Council.

Faculty, students, former students of the Trumbull Campus, and other universities are invited to submit poetry, essays, fiction, art work, or photography. We welcome submissions from anyone—student or nonstudent—in the Trumbull County area.

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Cover:  Douglas Mann

The ICON staff wishes to thank Richard and Robert Segall for their co-operation in dedicating this issue to their mother. We wish to also thank Douglas Mann for designing the cover and to extend our appreciation to Carol J. Perich for her continued dedication in typing our magazine.

Fall 1987, ICON  vi
A "SPRING" COMPOSITION

This essay was prompted by an English professor's request for a "spring" composition. Having read a flowery and verbose essay on autumn to his class, the professor assigned his class to do a vernal essay containing descriptive phrases and colorful language.

A cocky junior, however, took a different tack and wrote another type of "SPRING" COMPOSITION.

There is a children's toy which is sold under the "Slinky" brand name. It consists of a finely spun-cut, highly elastic SPRING. This SPRING is about three inches in diameter and close to four inches in length when fully contracted. In engineering terms it is a flat-stock, low modulus of elasticity, helix-wrapped tension SPRING. It was first produced accidentally by an automotive manufacturer in an attempt to lathe-cut a perfect piston. And despite the Madison Avenue name assigned to it by its current merchandisers, it is only a SPRING.

When used as a child's toy, this SPRING is easy to operate. It is so simple that even an adult can use it. The SPRING is removed from its colorful shipping box by dumping it into the small, eager hands of a curious child. As the child lifts one end of the SPRING's coils, it opens up like the air chamber of an accordion. To the child's delight this SPRING also makes noise! It is the sound which might be expected to emanate from the thin, metallic larynx of a yawning mechanical parrot. When sound alone becomes insufficient motivation, the child will begin to experiment with it.

But what on Earth can this SPRING do?

Among other things, it can walk!

The child places the SPRING at the top of a set of steps and pushes the upper coils in the direction of the landing below. To the amazement of the child, the SPRING will walk, end-over-inertially-compliant-end, down the steps! At the conclusion of its undulating journey, the SPRING will come to a vibrating stop... like Jell-O dumped out of a mold.

But that's not all this SPRING—the "Slinky"—can do! It can also be used for more serious purposes by adults. Physics teachers use this SPRING as a visual aid in teaching kinematics. This SPRING's properties are such that it can be used to simulate wave motion and to visually explain the Doppler effect. Engineering students find that this SPRING contributes to their understanding of inertial responses to variously generated mechanical inputs.

A simple SPRING.

A SPRING which is fluid in its motions of expansion and contraction. A SPRING which is quite inexpensive as a children's toy and a decided bargain as a visual aid for several disciplines of physics and engineering. A simple SPRING whose accidental birth has entertained more than two generations of wide-eyed children and has added depth to the knowledge of equally wide-eyed students.

Truly a SPRING for all seasons.

— Charles Fisher

My name is Johnny,
And I have a secret.
You see, it has taken me
A long time to admit it—
I am illiterate.

Somehow I was allowed to pass GO
Without collecting the $200 dough.
God, I can't even play that game!
I'm so tired of the lies, the shame,
That day by day continue to grow.

For years I have managed to hide my secret,
But computers now threaten my "safe" career.
No more just getting by in today's job market.
Someone once told me that "Reading is Power,"
But I'd just settle for a little self respect.

There is nowhere, nowhere left to hide.
Is there anyone out there who is on my side?
Can you help tutor me
And convince me
That I am no dummy?

It would make me unbelievably happy
To read my grandson a bedtime story;
To understand the warnings that flash by on my TV;
Why, just to be able to sign my own name.
(And I've heard there are millions who feel the same.)

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Why, just to be able to sign my own name.
(And I've heard there are millions who feel the same.)

— Leslie A. Sams
The Age of Change

We are a steel town.
Our steel mills, once booming business ventures that
Our fathers devoted years of their lives to,
Are being sucked up into a
Rapidly revolving funnel cloud
Of impending doom.

Runaway costs, foreign imports, and disputes
Between union and management—
These factors are raising our collective blood pressures
And are turning a generation's steel-induced dreams
Into rusty nightmares.

Too many must now work for a minimal minimum wage.
Even the blue collar workers—the backbone of our nation—
Are given almost no choice:
"Concessions are needed if this company
Is to survive."

It's time that we realize what is happening, for
Change is inevitable; it's the end of one era
And the beginning of another:
"The Industrial Age" as we knew it is now evolving into
"The Information Age."

Advanced technology is sweeping over us, engulfing us,
And is scaring the daylight out of the uninformed, the unprepared.
But those who seek training, schooling, can defend themselves
Against this growing invasion of
Computers, circuits, robotics.

Pray that our fathers, who fear losing their
Long-worked-for pensions,
Can cope with this change—
And pray that Society will smile on them for their
Past efforts and dedication and will give them a
Chance to adjust.

— Leslie A. Sams

In This, Our Year of Celebration

If we could wake the Ones Who Sleep
And call them back from ages deep
To show them what has since emerged
In this, their very life-blood's purge,

They, who fought so valiantly
And won for us democracy —
What would they say, who view the land —
America, as dreamed, or damned?

We make the rich man's wealth obese
And manage to our own decrease —
Hand over knife that cuts our throats —
Find better things to do than vote.

We patient asses close our eyes,
All other governments despise
Who threaten economic health
(Who really threaten few men's wealth).

We send our sons to fight and die
And we still believe in Apple Pie,
And Mom, and all things Just and Fine,
While we stand in unemployment lines.

They trusted us with the Infant Dream;
What will we say, who stilled scream
With smoother-pillow underhead,
"We don't know why the baby's dead"?

— Margaret L. Pinkerton
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What will we say, who stifled scream
With smother-pillow underhead,
"We don’t know why the baby’s dead"?

— Margaret L. Pinkerton
BILLY’S BOUQUET

Once my Billy brought me flowers
and he held them tightly in his hands.

Billy thought that his flowers
were the finest in all the land.

There were buttercups so yellow
like bits of sun tucked in,

And dandelions were bright with gold,
they reflected on his chin.

The amethysts of clover nestled in emerald leaves of green,
they were jewels from nature’s kingdom
which he presented to his queen.

Billy gave me these treasures
and I have loved them ever more.

Billy brought me love and happiness
and he was only four.

— Elizabeth Dohar

METAMORPHOSIS

He could live on pop tarts and soda pop,
Sloppy joes with a cherry on top,
Pizza with peanut butter, McNuggets with dips,
But veggies or cheese never pass his lips.

One minute he’s happy, and then he gets mad.
He’s thrilled about something—then suddenly sad.
He’s unruly and noisy, then quiet and pensive;
His range of emotion is deep and extensive.

His world is a myriad of Matchbox cars,
Of baseball, bears, and fireflies in jars.
The accoutrements change, but his room is the same;
It’s a mess! A disgrace! A shambles! A shame!

But—there are signs that have lately shown up
That are the difference in “growing” and “being grown up.”
Some days he’s a hellion, but his eyes reflect heaven;
He’s a boy-turning-man: he’s the age of eleven!

— Barbara A. Banish

Splashing About 
— Robert P. Lewis
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— Barbara A. Banish
SOMEONE’S SON

All Mondays are gloomy, and this one was no exception. I was driving to work—feeling quite grumpy, a friend to no one. Then I saw a school bus coming toward me, with a long string of traffic behind it. “Great,” I thought. “Just what I don’t need—to be held up by a stupid school bus.” Sure enough, the lights flashed on, the little STOP paddle swung out, and I was first in line. I noticed the side of the bus: “Fairhaven School,” it said. That was even worse because it is the school all the retarded kids in our community attend. My sense of humor, almost non-existent to start, evaporated totally.

And then I saw him. . . .

On the step of the neat, white house stood a child. His age would be hard to guess—perhaps nine, or twelve, maybe even fourteen. He smiled a big, friendly greeting—to the school bus driver, to all the cars in line, to the world. His hand shot up to the sky, and I saw the bus driver smile and wave in return. A slight, nice-looking woman handed him a tin lunch pail, and he gave her a kiss on the cheek and turned back to the road. The smile was still there. I marveled. What did he have to be so happy about?

He started down the steps—backwards. On to his knees, one step, then another, then another—four in all. Slowly, slowly. Every movement was careful and deliberate—studied, well practiced. Finally, he made it to the bottom. A look of reassurance toward the woman, his mother, I guess. He turned again toward the bus, pride showing in every angle of his being. Everyone watched. Very slowly, one careful step at a time, he walked toward the bus. I began to feel an awakening pride for this person. Somehow I knew that, inside, he was running joyously to his bus.

He made it to the bus steps and stopped. One more proud look at his mother. Then, carefully, carefully he began to climb aboard. I knew that cars behind me were impatient. The time was getting late, I had left my bed unmade that morning, dirty dishes were in my sink, and at work I had a desk full of papers. So many problems, so busy, so rushed. All the cares of a working woman in the 80’s. Too many things to do but not enough time to do them. I watched the boy, someone’s son. It seemed as though all my cares fell away, they seemed so insignificant and trivial. This child was accomplishing in his life more joy and fulfillment than I, with all my “advantages,” had ever hoped to achieve. I felt ashamed.

He reached the top step. I could see him through the window. He found a seat and became just another young boy on his way to school. The bus driver closed the door, and the STOP paddle swung in. She smiled and waved a “thank you” to me, and I started down the road to work again.

I shall never forget that boy. I never saw him again, although I suppose that the same ritual is performed daily. He has become a symbol to me, so that when I find myself feeling handicapped I think of him. In my mind’s eye, the day is sunny and warm. I see him standing on the porch. The hand shoots out in greeting again, the smile runs onto his face. . . .

— Pamela R. Anderson

NEVER JUDGE . . . BY THE COVER

“Mother is so fortunate . . . she got an apartment in that nice new high rise . . . now she can be with people her own age . . . you know, someone to talk to . . . .

“i hear the doors clang shut all the way down the hall . . . everybody’s going into their own rooms . . . thinks i, it seems like death row must be . . . with each one wondering which one of us will be the next one to die . . . .”

“There she sits in that wheel chair . . . all day long . . . I hear that she’s been in this nursing home for fifty years . . . Boy does she have it good . . . nothing to worry about . . . like taxes, food, utilities . . . wonder what she’s crying about . . . .”

“i was only eighteen when i came here . . . a disgrace to my family because i had a baby out of wedlock . . . i wonder . . . where is my little boy today . . . who is my little boy today . . . with only one life to live . . . fate sure dealt me a losing hand . . . .”

“Look at him, will ya . . . a seventy-three year-old retard . . . what a way to go . . . just breezein’ through life with the mind of a seven year old . . . livin’ in a world of his own . . . ha, ha, ha”

“i’m waitin’ for the mail to come, i wait every day and nothing ever comes for me, but i think maybe today i’ll get a letter . . . maybe even a package . . . hope they have ice cream at dinner . . . better eat all my food today . . . santa claus might be lookin’ . . . huh, huh, huh”

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— Elizabeth Dohar
Window Daze

The droplets land upon the glass,
Slowly sliding to the base;
One unites with another,
Together, they win the race!

— Diane Marie Victoria

THE MOON FLOWER

I stood in a ripening twilight
meaning to think about the circling clouds,
their snowy whiteness covering all above,

but thought instead, I do not want
to die here, away from home, away
from him as he goes to the back yard
to gather in the fading light,
as he breathes the citrus of oranges
and feels his wrists and elbows tingle
when he stretches to cut fruit from the trees.

I remembered how the moon flower
would open wide for the night
how it revealed in itself the quality
of his face better than any photograph,
the changing colors of his eyes,
the expanding thoughtfulness of his mind.

I thought, when I get home again
I will stand on the back porch
and watch him cultivate the soil,
and a kind of healing will begin,
until the days and months ripen like a row
of produce on a window sill,

until I, too, can walk in the yard
on an early October morning
and look deep into the moon flower
with neither smell nor blemish
and not think of him, not him.

— Mary Ann Lowry

Silvery Dew

— Robert P. Lewis
Window Daze

The droplets land upon the glass,
Slowly sliding to the base;
One unites with another,
Together, they win the race!
— Diane Marie Victoria

THE MOON FLOWER

I stood in a ripening twilight
meaning to think about the circling clouds,
their snowy whiteness covering all above,

but thought instead, I do not want
to die here, away from home, away
from him as he goes to the back yard
to gather in the fading light,
as he breathes the citrus of oranges
and feels his wrists and elbows tingle
when he stretches to cut fruit from the trees.

I remembered how the moon flower
would open wide for the night
how it revealed in itself the quality
of his face better than any photograph,
the changing colors of his eyes,
the expanding thoughtfulness of his mind.

I thought, when I get home again
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— Mary Ann Lowry

Silvery Dew
— Robert P. Lewis
FROSTFIRE

Summer goes to rest within our memories
As it flies away on wings of frost.
Artful Autumn is manifest
As with fiery hues the earth is embossed.

The leaves t
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And clusters of color surround us
With never a hint of stark winter scenes
That will soon wrap their harshness around us.

Summer harvest is over; now apples are ripe
As bright, crisp, and sweet as fall days.
The beauty and bounty of Nature are shown
With a charm that changes, but perfection that stays.

— Barbara A. Banish

Autumn Beauty

Unlike my neighbor
Across the road
I stir no leaves upon my farm.

I let them lie
In hued complexions,
For I am obsessed with nature’s charm.

— Diane Marie Victoria

Autumn Sentinel

— Marla Richards
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Autumn Sentinel

— Marla Richards
A Time For Dreams
— Wanda Kover

SAMANTHA

Little hands busy playing
With crayons, toys, and books.
Eyes that sparkle and shine,
Giving one of those precious looks.

Tiny feet scampering constantly
With enthusiasm and joy.
Bouncing off to frolic,
Leaving behind a favorite toy.

Devilish looks of amusement
As the plate falls to the floor.
Abrupt and deliberate movement
Of opening and closing the door.

Delightful little girl of joy
Who fills my hours with love.
Your smile, your warmth, and presence
Are gifts from up above.

— Jill M. Nethers

Child of Innocence

My four-year-old daughter
Came home from Sunday School
All bouncing and beautiful
And climbed upon a kitchen chair, and stood
To ask an Important Question.

“Mommy,” she said, “are you and Daddy married?”
Trying not to let the
what-are-they-teaching-in-Sunday-School-these-days
Shocked look show,
I said, “Of course, sweetheart,"
Hoping this was not leading to
The next Important Question.
(You know, the “Where did I come from?” one.)

But next she asked, “Well, am I married to Daddy, too?”
And my thoughts started spinning
Around questions of child abuse
And statements like “It happens in the best of families.”
But I only said, “No, sweetheart, you are NOT.”

“Well,” she asked, “am I married to you, then?”
And as I banished my fears to the basement (to do penance)
I walked over to my daughter
And whisked her off the chair
With a
You know you are note allowed to stand on chairs, little miss hug
And held her for just one more minute,
One more hug,
Thankful that this world had not yet tainted
My silly, innocent four-year-old.

She was just confusing the bonds of marriage
With the bonds of love.

— Margaret L. Pinkerton
A Time For Dreams
— Wanda Kover

Samantha

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With crayons, toys, and books.
Eyes that sparkle and shine,
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— Margaret L. Pinkerton
This Poor Old Man

This poor old man, so thin and frail,
Begging in the street—
I cannot help but notice
His badly deformed feet.
His feet both twist beneath him—
His legs are badly bent.
I walk by and wonder
Where all his bones went.
And as I walk on, I hear a moan
And turn around to see;
And there’s the man, so badly deformed,
And he’s reaching out to me.
And my heart is torn, the pain intense,
I’d like to scream and cry,
Oh Lord, God in Heaven,
Just tell me the reason why.
But I sadly smile and shake my head
And turn to walk away
When that moan comes once again,
And it’s asking me to stay.
Well, I hate to look around, you see,
For I know what I will find.
But as I glance at this deformed old man,
I notice he is blind.
Well, now the tears flow freely,
Streaming down my face,
And I wish with all my heart
I were in a different place.
And then this man speaks softly,
“Jesus loves me still.
If I’m to be deformed like this,
Then let it be His will.
And even though I’m like this,
The Lord still blesses me;
For I am filled with the Spirit
And Heaven I can see.’’
I dig into my pocket
To see what I can give,
Pondering over the reasons
He should want to live.
I still don’t understand
This blessing he had got,
All I see is this deformed old man
Lying there to rot.

I have no money to give him
So I hand him now my cross.
And the smile which he gives me
Makes it worth the loss.
And then the old man whispers,
“Don’t let the good Lord down.
I want you to wear a smile
And erase that sad frown.
For although deformed and pained am I
And nothing by myself,
The Lord has really blessed me
With an abundance of His wealth.
This isn’t jewels or money—
That’s not the wealth I speak of.
This wealth is a special spot
In His kingdom up above.’’
Now I understand
How this man could want to live.
It’s because of all the blessings
The Lord has to give.

— Peggy Kozarich

Disparity

— Wanda Kover
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Strangers

In my bedroom, on the dresser,
Sits a picture from long ago.
The young girl smiles so warmly and
Beside her is her beau.
There's a tree to shade the lovers
By the steps in perfect rows.
Oh, I never knew that couple
In the shade of long ago.

The young man looks so handsome—
Dark hair, his frame is lean.
The pretty girl seems eager
To grasp his hand and share his dream.
In their eyes there glows a light,
A glimmer of their bond.
Oh, I wonder who it was
That touched them with that wand?

But their dream—it lost its fire
In the winds of days gone past.
They held it for a while—
Then it slipped on through their grasp.
Devotion felt the raging tides
That make the undertow.
Oh, I wish I'd known that couple
On the shores of long ago.

Now their bond is but a memory
And their love has blown away.
Only fragments of it linger
In their children's eyes today.
The camera stopped the hands of time
Before love fled without a trace.
Those young lovers in the picture—
They have my parents' face.

— Jeanne Bryner

AUNT CARRIE

Of all the people I've ever known, loved, or remembered, I cherish the time she was part of my life. . . .
The only jewelry I ever saw her wear was a plain gold band—thick, shiny, and redolent of the simplicity that was characteristic of her life. Her hands spoke of work: ironing, cooking, cleaning. The bed was made and the breakfast dishes done before the rest of her day began.

Sometimes after supper, when the dishes were done and everyone was busy with something else, she'd get an old kettle out from underneath the top cupboard and make fudge or seafoam. I'd help stir, or, best of all, lick the spoon while the candy was cooling off. Other times she'd sit out on the porch swing and tell me stories about her life with Uncle George. She was always "Aunt Carrie," never "Mother," although it was she who ultimately took the place of the mother I had never seen or known.

In the bank were bonds with both our names on them. Aunt Carrie was entitled to cash them and use them herself; she never did. Her only luxury in life was a standing appointment at Jon's Beauty Salon every Thursday.

She was the "oldest mother" at my Girl Scout meetings; my companion at Saturday afternoon movies; a comforting presence in my bedroom, seated in an old chair, till I, who feared darkness and nightmares, fell asleep.

I was twenty-one when her life ended, Aunt Carrie seventy-nine. Death was something I could not begrudge her; in my mind cancer is far worse. In the silence of her room, death waited. As autumn fires burned and summer slipped away like the fading fragments of her life, something beyond human description filled the room. I've heard ministers preach on the love of God and can only conclude that the love in that room belonged to Him.

Twenty-two years have come and gone since that September. Somehow the character of that woman born in the 1800's, who, as a child, used a wooden step-stool to stand on so she could do the wash for her mother, stays with me.

Of all the people I've ever known, loved or remembered—I cherish the time she was part of my life.

— Sandra Percy
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Sandcastles and Sunsets

If I were a sandcastle
on a Saturday morn,
I’d ask the grey seagulls
to be my alarm horn.
I’d beg them to frighten
the old gusty wind,
to push back green turtles
again and again.

So fragile I’d stand
alone near the shore
with nary a white knight
to gallop my moor.
And where is my princess
in need of a kiss?
Is her black-stallioned lover
lost in night’s mist?

Now hear the fierce tide
as he crashes my walls.
His pounding white waves
rush through my halls.
I crumble, I crumble
‘neath his powerful hand.
Where once stood a castle
lies now only sand.

If I’d been a sandcastle
crushed by the sea,
would the pink sunset fairy
grant one wish for me?
Tomorrow, tomorrow...
let little hands drag
red buckets, blue shovels,
and gum-wrapper flag.

— Jeanne Bryner

I Think That I Shall Walk Tonight

I think that I shall walk tonight
Along the water’s edge
And let the sound of crashing waves
Echo within my head.

The chilling wind of Autumn’s birth
Feels fresh upon my face.
So filled with nature’s energy
I quicken now my pace.

I pass over the jagged rocks
To walk on Sandy Beach.
A light glows in the distance
Seeming somehow out of reach.

The rain begins a steady fall
In this brisk autumn air.
So tenderly it touches me
That I don’t seem to care.

My eyes now rise up to the skies
To greet October’s moon,
And, smiling, I tell myself
That I will find love soon.

I pass the boat house hurriedly
Deciding it’s too cold.
I turn for home now wishing
That I had a hand to hold.

The wind kicks up in stronger gales;
It whistles through the trees.
I close the door in retrospect
Feeling rather pleased.

When morning comes I’ll greet the day
Alone but satisfied.
This walk along the water’s edge
Has left me warm inside.

— Peggy Sue Byrnes

Arcadia National Park, Maine

— Charles Fisher
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Arcadia National Park, Maine

— Charles Fisher
Windmill: A Study in Black & White
— Lori Caldwell

My Poetry Is in the Air

Don’t try to see, don’t look or stare.
Believe me when I say it’s there.
It moves upon the morning mist
And touches daybreak with a kiss.
It’s in the air that’s rushing by
So fast it sometimes makes me cry.
It lingers long on lazy days
And floats upon a breeze in May.
With winter’s chill it runs in silence
Or howls with all the wind’s defiance.
It swishes down into the valley
Or rumbles down an urban alley.
And sometimes when the air is right,
I grab my pen and start to write.
Sometimes it flows from pen to page.
Sometimes it floats on out, away.
I’d like to think the good ones stay,
But I know they always get away.
For when I hear it sliding by,
I only catch the part that dies.
My poetry is in the air,
And some I like to keep right there.
I would never try to write it down,
For all the world would look and frown.
When written down, all checked and gauged,
It dies upon the printed page.
So I let it go upon its way.
To whisper in whose ear it may.

— John P. Wonders

Goin’ Fishin’

When the argument reaches
Voluminous pitch,
And I’ve called him a jerk
And he’s called me a bitch,

When the kids breathe the words
They’ve heard us both say
At the ends of our ropes,
At the end of our days,

He’ll say, ‘‘I’m goin’ fishin’.’’

The argument, end.
Things will get better
Or so I’ll pretend.

And he will go fishing,
His temperament, soothe.
He’ll be back tomorrow
If he happens to choose.

I’ll stay with the children,
Straighten the house,
Run back and forth,
SuperMom (supermouse).

I’ll reassure children;
All will calm down.
They won’t have to leave
Their school or their town.

For now, I’ll retire
My needing and wishing,
But someday I’ll tell him,
‘‘No, I’M going fishing.’’

— Margaret L. Pinkerton
Windmill: A Study in Black & White
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"No, I'm going fishing."

— Margaret L. Pinkerton
Caution Lights

The cadence-like tap of Maggie’s brown pumps was not unlike the hum of a drone’s wings as she and Carl made their way through the terminal’s soiled alley. Robotically, Carl embraced her angular frame, brushed his lips to her cheek, and in his neutral voice reminded her to call when she landed. Like an obedient child Maggie accepted Carl’s Old Spice kiss and subtle command. Maggie grudgingly accepted Carl the way she did most things in her life; at age forty-seven there were few remaining surprises.

With a smile that belonged on Cosmopolitan, the willowy blonde stewardess greeted Maggie. In her cardinal red jacket and blue linen skirt, the stewardess looked almost too perfect. Maggie breathed in the erotic scent of the blonde’s cologne and noticed how the winged insignia perched on the stewardess’ firm left breast.

As Maggie lifted her grey shoulder bag to the overhead storage area, she felt her right breast prosthesis shift slightly. Carefully, Maggie lowered herself into her seat of the “No Smoking” section and peered out the mirror-sized window. She wondered if her emerald slacks and ivory blouse would wrinkle much on the ten-hour flight. With the same prudent hand that had chosen the pant suit, she eased her seat back. The Cosmopolitan stewardess stood up and explained the oxygen, seat belts, and exits. Maggie observed her with the same attentiveness she gave the yellow-smocked grocery clerk who rang her order up on Saturday mornings.

The seat belt light flashed on; Maggie buckled up and waited for the start of their ascent. A bearded young man in blue jeans sat one seat away from her. Maggie disliked feeling cramped and was thankful that no one would have the center seat. The gradual crescendo of the jet’s engines assured her that she was on her way. Her heart pounded with the music of the engines; she was flying to Spain to see her brother Ralph.

Ralph had lived in Spain for more than twenty years. Ralph said that Spain was a land of collage-colored skies: iris purple, indigo blue, charcoal grey, rose-pink sunsets, and unending radiant sunrises. Ralph—he would say something like that. Critically, she shook her head from side to side just thinking about him; her left hand rubbed the bridge of her nose and momentarily lifted her glasses past her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

As if she were filing forms, Maggie ruffled through her brown leather purse until she found the last dog-eared picture Ralph had mailed. Dressed in dark trousers and a casual striped shirt, with his arm around a girl she didn’t know, he stood in front of a flower cart. The colored photo presented Ralph with a healthy tan and slightly graying hair. His face seemed to ignore time; his smile was warm and genuine. Shit, he had reason to smile! What had he ever done? Played the cello? Taught English?

Maggie was the one—the family’s Gibraltar. Maggie had been the one to care for their aging father after his stroke until his death. And now their mother was dying of bowel cancer. The illnesses had taken the starch out of Maggie, and the wrinkles were harder to smooth every day. Last week she had given up and admitted her mother into a place called ‘Gentle Acres.’ At least the name sounded—well, peaceful.

Maggie fluffed her fading auburn hair in the back and felt the tightness of her neck muscles. Her thoughts went to Ralph again. She needed him to come home. Her mother wanted to see him one last time. Damn, she hoped he would come! Hell’s bells, it wasn’t such a big thing. Maggie had already purchased his ticket—now if she could just convince him that he was really needed.

Cosmopolitan floated near and asked her what she wanted to drink. Maggie’s soul longed for a “double,” a “shooter,” or whatever would help her give a convincing speech to Ralph. But in her usual reserved tone she simply requested a Coke.

The bearded young man made pleasant conversation during their meal. He was going to Madrid to study for one year. Maggie asked him what his major was. “Art,” he replied. Behind a tight-lipped smile Maggie said, “That’s nice.”

The meal, like the flight, was nondescript and non-eventful. Maggie used the ladies’ room once and was glad the water had plenty of blue disinfectant in it. Social diseases were on the rise, and, well. . . She straightened the bow on her ivory blouse and adjusted the belt to her slacks before leaving the rest room. She was not beautiful, but she was attractive with the right amount of make-up. She weighed only ten pounds more than the day she married Carl. Maggie was pleased with herself. She had little patience for those with idle hands and flabby thighs.

Maggie was hopeful that Ralph wouldn’t take sharp notice of her prosthesis. He had not seen her since the surgery and she was always aware of those first post-surgery meetings with anyone. Ralph had called her and sent flowers during that terrible time. He was drinking when he called, and he had cried before he hung up. Remembering the sound of his voice made her flush. Not that everyone hadn’t been strong for her—they had. Carl had been there every day, holding her hand in his same old way and bringing her fresh flowered nightgowns.

But Ralph’s call had been the one time she had felt someone else had really understood the pain the way she did. “Maggie,” Ralph had said, “I wish to God it was me, it shouldn’t be you Maggie—Hell, you never even looked at cigs. . . shit, Maggie, I love you, I wish I could hold you—it is so unfair.” And his speech was not so eloquent, but the words had a tugging agony to them that would not be dismissed.

Maggie’s step quickened a little as she descended the plane and entered the terminal. Searching a small island of faces, she saw his bouquet first.

“Maggie!” he shouted. When Ralph hugged her and twirled her around, she felt almost young again. His arms were so tight and his voice so calming. She wanted to absolve all his past sins.

Except for the grey in his hair, there seemed to be little mark of time on him. She noticed a slight Spanish accent to his diction as he hurried her to the luggage pick-up area. Only the tiny scar in his left eyebrow made him her Ralph, otherwise he might have been a daring matador in “suit of light,” he was that handsome.

Ralph was so full of his plans for them that she momentarily forgot her
Caution Lights

The cadence-like tap of Maggie's brown pumps was not unlike the hum of a drone's wings as she and Carl made their way through the terminal's soiled alley. Robotically, Carl embraced her angular frame, brushed his lips to her cheek, and in his neutral voice reminded her to call when she landed. Like an obedient child Maggie accepted Carl's Old Spice kiss and subtle command. Maggie grudgingly accepted Carl the way she did most things in her life; at age forty-seven there were few remaining surprises.

With a smile that belonged on Cosmopolitan, the willowy blonde stewardess greeted Maggie. In her cardinal red jacket and blue linen skirt, the stewardess looked almost too perfect. Maggie breathed in the erotic scent of the blonde's cologne and noticed how the winged insignia perched on the stewardess' firm left breast.

As Maggie lifted her grey shoulder bag to the overhead storage area, she felt her right breast prosthesis shift slightly. Carefully, Maggie lowered herself into her seat of the "No Smoking" section and peered out the mirror-sized window. She wondered if her emerald slacks and ivory blouse would wrinkle much on the ten-hour flight. With the same prudent hand that had chosen the pant suit, she eased her seat back. The Cosmopolitan stewardess stood up and explained the oxygen, seat belts, and exits. Maggie observed her with the same attentiveness she gave the yellow-smocked grocery clerk who rang her order up on Saturday mornings.

The seat belt light flashed on; Maggie buckled up and waited for the start of their ascent. A bearded young man in blue jeans sat one seat away from her. Maggie disliked feeling cramped and was thankful that no one would have the center seat. The gradual crescendo of the jet's engines assured her that she was on her way. Her heart pounded with the music of the engines; she was flying to Spain to see her brother Ralph.

Ralph had lived in Spain for more than twenty years. Ralph said that Spain was a land of collage-colored skies: iris purple, indigo blue, charcoal grey, rose-pink sunsets, and unending radiant sunrises. Ralph—he would say something like that. Critically, she shook her head from side to side just thinking about him; her left hand rubbed the bridge of her nose and momentarily lifted her glasses past her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

As if she were filing forms, Maggie ruffled through her brown leather purse until she found the last dog-eared picture Ralph had mailed. Dressed in dark trousers and a casual striped shirt, with his arm around a girl she didn't know, he stood in front of a flower cart. The colored photo presented Ralph with a healthy tan and slightly graying hair. His face seemed to ignore time; his smile was warm and genuine. Shit, he had reason to smile! What had he ever done? Played the cello? Taught English?

Maggie was the one—the family's Gibraltar. Maggie had been the one to care for their aging father after his stroke until his death. And now their mother was dying of bowel cancer. The illnesses had taken the starch out of Maggie, and the wrinkles were harder to smooth every day. Last week she had given up and admitted her mother into a place called "Gentle Acres." At least the name sounded—well, peaceful.

Maggie fluffed her fading auburn hair in the back and felt the tightness of her neck muscles. Her thoughts went to Ralph again. She needed him to come home. Her mother wanted to see him one last time. Damn, she hoped he would come! Hell's bells, it wasn't such a big thing. Maggie had already purchased his ticket—now if she could just convince him that he was really needed.

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The white stucco apartment building was far from lavish, but it was clean. From Ralph's third story window she could see the curved pink-tiled roofs and listen to the voices rising and falling from the market place down the road.

Ralph's apartment was sparsely furnished; two chairs, two end stands, and a junk-store lamp. The white iron-framed double bed was made up in fresh, powder-blue, daisy sheets. There were pictures of family, prints from concerts, and in the corner of the living room sat his tattered black cello case. Maggie knew he had probably cleaned for days knowing she would visit. Half-filled ash trays were the only trace of untidiness.

He fixed them a cup of coffee, and she kicked off her shoes. Lifting her feet to the coffee table, she took a deep breath and laid her head back on the worn mauve sofa.

There was no easy way to speak of their mother's illness, so Maggie simply said, "Ralph, Mom's very sick, you know that; well, she's dying and she wants to see you. Ralph, could you fly back with me, so she could—see you—I mean I think she wants to say good-by."

Ralph drank his coffee for a long time and then he went over to his cello case. Watching him open it was almost like observing Mass. So deft his touch and so sharp the response of the instrument.

Ralph picked up an empty cigar box and went down to the street. On a park bench shaded by tall palm trees, he played his cello—until midnight. Passersby would drop coin and bill into his cigar box, and on he would play. Eyes closed, his horse-hair bow caressed the strings of the warm brown cello, and his soul emptied itself into the dark with his haunting notes.

Maggie had forgotten the mellow, see-sawing notes of his bass-string instrument. She had forgotten a lot of things. But with each note she seemed to remember a little more.

As a young lady she had wanted to be a singer. Maggie would write songs and sing to the music on the radio. Her mother had discouraged singing, unless it was for the church choir. Her parents wanted her educated, and successfully convinced her to enter St. John's Nursing School. Then she met Carl, had four kids, and only sang in the tub or on the way home from work. She sure as hell could never write a song now. Where had her music gone?

Ralph had been so different as a child and as an adult. He had married once—another cellist—it ended in divorce. Their daughter was grown now and lived in Canada. Ralph had refused to eat peas, to fight in Vietnam, and to seek permanent employment. For the latter two counts he was disowned by his parents. His cello and he had fled to Canada and later to Spain.

Through the years Ralph had written and called frequently. Their father died cursing him, and their mother had forgotten the cause of all the fuss after so many years.

Under collage-colored skies, Ralph showed Maggie the streets of Segovia where Roman aqueducts still provide the city with its water. They visited the majestic castle built by the Arabs in Alhambra. Surrounded by rose-colored structures, quiet flower gardens, and delicate fountains, Maggie became a princess. Maggie met Ralph's friends and learned to order her meals in Spanish. But mostly she listened to Ralph play his cello, the tip-toeing melodies of his life. His park bench concerts had a lullabye tone that made her almost cry.

Ralph, the lucky bastard, had never punched a time clock or made a bank deposit. Maggie wondered where he went with his eyes closed, resting near the neck of his cello, as he performed Bach and Beethoven for total strangers.

Two weeks later, heading for the States alone, Maggie closed her eyes and tried to imagine her once youthful voice singing to the radio, the songs she used to write and how it would feel to—just once—run a caution light. She fell asleep.

— Jeanne Bryner

Saint Patrick's Cathedral, New York

— Charles Fisher
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